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## ENGAGING DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION IN THE NEOLIBERAL AGE

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**ABSTRACT.** For the democratic tradition to return to a vanguard position in education requires a thorough exploration of the problems of democratization in education and an inventory of possible new forms. In this essay, Simon Marginson reviews five books concerned with democracy and education: Michael Apple's *Educating the "Right" Way*, Denis Carlson's *Leaving Safe Harbors*, A. Belden Fields and Walter Feinberg's *Education and Democratic Theory*, Trevor Gale and Kathleen Densmore's *Engaging Teachers*, and Klas Roth's *Democracy, Education and Citizenship*. While these authors imagine democracy in somewhat different ways, they have a common interest in the role of public schooling in the formation of democratic agents and practices. The books do not offer a definitive account of the problems of democratization, nor do they embody a major breakthrough in democratic educational thinking, but they all provide helpful explorations of these issues. Marginson concludes with some thoughts on commodification and neoliberal economism in education, a contemporary focus of discussion in democratic educational circles.

In this review essay, I will focus on five recent books concerned with democracy and education: Michael Apple's *Educating the "Right" Way: Markets, Standards, God and Inequality*, Denis Carlson's *Leaving Safe Harbors: Towards a New Progressivism in American Education and Public Life*, A. Belden Fields and Walter Feinberg's *Education and Democratic Theory: Finding a Place for Community Participation in Public School Reform*, Trevor Gale and Kathleen Densmore's *Engaging Teachers: Towards a Radical Democratic Agenda for Schooling*, and Klas Roth's *Democracy, Education and Citizenship: Towards a Theory on the Education of Deliberative Democratic Citizens*. Each book confines its exploration to certain parts of this large and heterogeneous field of discussion. While the authors imagine democracy in somewhat different ways, they have a common interest in the role of public schooling in the formation of democratic agents and practices. On the whole they focus more on policy, governance, and institutional leadership than on curricula and pedagogies. Michael Apple, Trevor Gale and Kathleen Densmore, and Denis Carlson explicitly position themselves in the radical democratic and radical progressivist traditions in education. They all target the educational perspectives and policies of neoliberals and cultural conservatives, especially market mechanisms and standardized testing programs. Carlson's approach is different in that he is concerned not so much with reasserting already established democratic traditions as with transforming those traditions. Klas Roth takes on the project of theorizing, using a Habermasian framework, democratic formation in a multicultural society. Finally, Belden Fields and Walter Feinberg explore participation in school governance through a case study of a Project for Educational Democracy formed by teachers, parents, and community members in one school board district.

Democratic theorizing and activism in education in the United States and other Western nations can be traced at least as far back as Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

It owes more to John Dewey than to any other thinker. It constituted an important current of human activity through most of the twentieth century, and it continues to contribute to a wide-ranging scholarly conversation and to mainstream public discussion about schooling and community colleges (though it is less prominent in discussions about higher education and vocational education) especially in English-speaking and Northern European nations. On the one hand, democracy in education is sustained by voluntarist activists who come from a wide variety of political persuasions; who draw variously on the American, French, and Russian revolutions; who want education to uplift students and communities; and who are motivated by notions of social reform, social improvement, egalitarianism, and the common or public good. On the other hand, it is sustained by the social momentum of educational systems themselves, which are continually being extended and deepened across populations and through the life cycle as part of the processes of modernization and credentialism. Whether conscious political activists or not, many professional educators mobilize support for this extension of education, not simply by pointing to the economic or status advantages that accrue to individuals, but by invoking the right of all citizens to education and knowledge and the virtues of a fair start in the competition for social position, ideas embedded in democratic traditions in education. Educational democracy has been mainstreamed, though its revolutionary aspect has not been and continues to be contested. In many nations, core democratic principles, such as equality of educational opportunity and local institutional accountability, are now thoroughly rooted in educational practices and popular understandings, notwithstanding (and also because of) the varied and sometimes contrary interpretations given to these principles. At the same time, demands for more equitable access to privileged institutions, for a better resource deal for emerging communities, and for school democracy from below continue to sustain grassroots campaigns. Even the proponents of voucher-based funding or the reassertion of the cultural canon in English, proposals that originate from outside the democratic tradition, feel obliged to explain that their policies will augment minority access, improve working-class graduation rates, or strengthen community decision making. Education for active citizenship is another strand of democratic argument that is broadly influential in schooling in many countries, although enthusiasm for educated citizenship and equality of opportunity is declining in policy circles.

The democratic tradition in education is too deeply rooted in the practices of professionals and in popular expectations about education to declare that it is in crisis. Nevertheless, it must be said that in the garden of democracy in education not all is growing well — if there is no crisis, there is certainly a malaise. That is clear from these five texts, with their stories of democratic reform stymied or

rendered more difficult; of official policy agendas captured by neoliberalism or swinging out of control in the populist winds; of ambiguities of the democratic project (around such issues as race versus class, leadership versus shared participation, inclusion versus achievement) being more problematic than they once seemed; and of principles that must be reasserted and reworked, at times from a position of defense or retreat. Occasionally, the tone of argument carries a sense of frustration, of thwarted desires for the activist and policy momentum of the 1960s and 1970s. In their different ways Apple, Carlson, and Fields and Feinberg all hint at deep-seated strategic problems and uncertainties.

The symptoms of this malaise are twofold. First, there is growing disenchantment with mainstream democracy's expression of popular sovereignty amid the commodification of politics and its reduction to a branch of marketed entertainment with its own celebrity cult. This disenchantment has translated not into a radicalized democratic citizenry, the response of 1789 or 1848 or 1945, but into cynicism and disengagement. A networked, media-heavy society has less space for the politics of local identity unless it is protected by fundamentalist defenses inimical to the democratic tradition, while the potential for a macrodemocratic alternative has been partly deconstructed by neoliberal "economization" and enforced social competition in education and other sectors. As Apple and Gale and Densmore note, neoliberalism offers little to the average family, except that it lifts from them the promises and burdens of local political activism by substituting regulated market signals in its place. Neoliberalism has little warmth or generosity about it; it is considerably less attractive than the notion of equality of educational opportunity. Still, it has secured a blanketing presence in government and media discourse, and it has a superficial discursive fit with the desires for commodified consumption now central to daily life. It seems to cut off the potential for political and social alternatives at every turn.

Second, there is globalization, which tends to undermine all political agendas constructed within national political frameworks, including movements for democratic education, unless and until such agendas are reworked to fit a more global context. Educational democracy and the politics of community building and the public good have not yet transferred as readily across borders and into common worldwide systems as have the Internet, educational policy models, and the now worldwide educational markets. Globalization does not eliminate the potential for strategies of democratization, but it does require that those strategies be revisited and, where necessary, reworked. For example, whereas for most of the twentieth century the politics of educational equality and democratization were primarily about class and economic inequality, in the 1960s and 1970s gender came to prominence, and, more recently, issues of cultural diversity have become increasingly important, as is reflected in Roth's book. In part these shifts reflect the rise in the educational threshold, which universalizes the tools for self-managing identity, but they are also partly an effect of globalization.

In discussing these five books we might first ask how do they imagine democratic practices in education? How do they conceive classic themes associated

with democracy, such as freedom, equality, solidarity, inclusiveness, and community? How do they interpret the contemporary tensions between democratic practices and neoliberalism and educational conservatism? How do they understand the implications of globalization and of cultural politics? Above all, how would they extend democracy — that is, how would they augment the formation of individual and collective democratic agency in education, particularly in schooling, which is their site of investigation?

#### THE SPECTER OF THE NEW RIGHT

The specter of the New Right hangs over the work of Apple and of Gale and Densmore. The back cover of Apple's *Educating the "Right" Way* states that "Rightist reforms pose a threat to the democracy of public education," and promises "commonsense solutions that show what teachers and concerned parents can do to halt these trends and return education to a more democratic path that suits the needs of all American children."<sup>1</sup> In *Engaging Teachers* Gale and Densmore, writing about both Australian and U.S. contexts, criticize the influence of the market in education and its anti-democratic agenda, along with the corresponding trends in policy and administration, and advise teachers on how to pursue a radical democratic practice.<sup>2</sup> They emphasize links to local communities. The starting point of both books is the critique of the New Right rather than the assertion of democratic practices; the latter goal is treated as subsequent to the critique, as if the democratic project cannot gain momentum until the weight that is crushing it is lifted. The two books differ in their points of emphasis, in part reflecting the differences of national context. Gale and Densmore focus mostly on the critique of neoliberalism and markets and on government support for neoliberalism. Apple, on the other hand, devotes much space to the religious Right ("authoritarian populists") and to cultural conservatives, as well as to those parents and aspirational professionals who sink their identities into neoliberal modernization. Gale and Densmore give more attention to a positive argument about the democratic practices they want.

*Educating the "Right" Way*, which is written with Apple's customary clarity and spirit, identifies neoliberalism as the leading political paradigm of the times and the economization of social life as the principal constraint on the potential for democratic agency. Not just political democracy but organic community has been displaced by the "market democracy" of atomized individuals roaming the shopping malls. Neoliberalism, according to Apple, places choice making in the marketplace at the center of freedom; while individuals do not have an equal capacity to exercise power in this system, everyone can consume something: "The ideal of the citizen is that of the purchaser" (*ERW*, 15–19 and 39). Gale and Densmore

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1. Michael Apple, *Educating the "Right" Way: Markets, Standards, God and Inequality* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001). This work will be cited as *ERW* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Trevor Gale and Kathleen Densmore, *Engaging Teachers: Towards a Radical Democratic Agenda for Schooling* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003). This work will be cited as *ET* in the text for all subsequent references.

mount a similar critique of the centrality of choice making in the market to neoliberalism (*ET*, 102ff.). Still, while these critiques are convincing in themselves, particularly the points about the formation of inequalities in market exchange, Apple might be making a little too much of the critique of market freedom and the alleged shift from politics to economics. Perhaps this is to confuse the “economic” political smokescreen with the political reality. The strategic problem is not New Right economics but New Right politics. This is an undemocratic politics but not an antipolitics or an evacuation of politics. Rather, it is a politics of authoritarian control that reconfigures the state-society relation, but because it is a *politics*, it must be contested not just economically but politically. Arguably, the New Right has gained its strategic purchase less from the positive appeal of market freedom than from governmental and political techniques that have deconstructed the potential for campaigns of democratization. It has a limited commitment to self-realization in education. Taken at face value, the rhetoric about choice-making individuals would imply that the neoliberal school is a democratizing institution, focused on forming students as thinking choosers! Instead, neoliberalism’s individual subject in education is not the self-realizing student but the parent as “owner” of the student, who is conceived as human capital. And the ultimate neoliberal educational subject is not the individual but “the market,” a programmatic abstraction with little popular appeal. For most people, the market in education (and elsewhere) offers not fulfillment, but anxiety and failure.

Neoliberalism in education is a productivist ideology that shifts the focus from student needs to student performance, as Apple notes (*ERW*, 71). It provides performance measurement tools that help governments to micromanage schools and systems, and it uses subsidized competition in governed education systems to manage and control parent and professional behavior. The problem is not that schooling as a whole has become capitalist. While neoliberal policies permit commercial companies to compromise public and pedagogical values in schooling, the effects are primarily ideological rather than economic. Nor is a subsidized voucher system a true economic market. Arguably, the key change is not the introduction of a commercial market and the withdrawal of government from public education as such — quite the contrary, government remains firmly in command — but the installation of *competition* in education at every level (between students, between teachers, between schools, between types of school, between school districts) as the central organizing principle of human relations.

Apple’s democratic alternative is grounded in Rawlsian positive freedom rather than negative freedom, and he starts from the perspective of those with the least power (*ERW*, 197). Democracy is seen as inherently egalitarian, and schools are treated as sites of collective power and struggle (*ERW*, 36 and 190). The notions of democratic agency presented here are not new but are drawn from Paulo Freire and the Brazilian experience; they include class-based organization, gender-based liberation, critical pedagogies with an egalitarian face (*ERW*, 77), and teachers as socially responsible professionals. At times the tone is nostalgic. As in much of the democratic campaigning of the period from the 1960s through the 1980s, Apple

generally presents the power and status of teachers as positive despite its ambiguous potential for community-based local control.

The approach taken by Gale and Densmore is a little different. They place less emphasis on recovering a prior democratic experience now suppressed by the New Right — perhaps they are more skeptical about past campaigns for democratization, or simply have less history with them — and place more emphasis on developing a new momentum for radical democratization based on what they call the “politics of engagement” (*ET*, 2). This is not just engagement for engagement’s sake (they are caustic about time-wasting committees), but requires a critical perspective and political action. According to Gale and Densmore, engaged teachers believe it is possible for ordinary people to make decisions; they criticize and transform everyday practices; they “exercise and develop their creative and problem-solving capacities by participating in the lives of communities”; they become transformed through participation in community work; and they “simultaneously enhance the individual and advance the community” (*ET*, 6). Gale and Densmore also argue that teacher activism draws on critical social science. At the same time, their concept of professionalism is modest, consisting primarily of the idea that teachers should listen to the community (*ET*, 73). They therefore develop a detailed and useful argument about democratic educational leadership (*ET*, 54–70). However, there is not much discussion about the roots of community or the roots of critical social science, or how these two formative sites are reconciled through the unified agency of the engaged teacher. Given that neoliberalism in government has deconstructed conditions for local community and has trapped or marginalized the critical social sciences, these elements need more attention. *Engaging Teachers* generally lacks a sense of the situatedness of democratic problems, of historical variations in the potential for democratic transformation, and of the crucial role played by local conditions, resources, and obstacles. Democratic agents are formed in specific circumstances. If universal prescriptions of political activism were enough, then schools would already be staffed by “engaged teachers.” On the whole Apple’s book connects better with day-to-day realities.

Significantly, Apple is sensitive to different strands within the educational Right and the potential for tensions among them. This is an important line of investigation that could provide strategic purchase. However his half-suggestion of possible sympathy between religious populists and radical democrats seems misplaced (*ERW*, 32–33). From time to time, both groups find themselves outside of the mainstream, but they espouse very different positions. For example, though they both reject absolute economic individualism, their conceptions of the human subject could hardly be more different. Perhaps Apple here again overplays the economic aspect of neoliberalism. He notes that cultural conservatives and authoritarian populists are not comfortable with freedom as individual choice: “Freedom is valued, but it is also loathed as a sign of danger, of ‘a world out of control’ ” (*ERW*, 177). Fortuitously for cultural conservatives, however, the main power to make individual economic choices is in the hands of those with strong incentives to preserve the system, and neoliberal competition and the performance

management of self-managing individuals and educational institutions provides a modernized system of social control that is more effective precisely because it is premised on the forms of freedom. As Rousseau put it in *Émile*, “there is no subjection so perfect as that which keeps the appearances of freedom. Thus the will itself is made captive.”<sup>3</sup> Ironically, this treatise was pitched against the aristocratic educational conservatism of the day. Now that the *bourgeois* is the conservative, this kind of guided freedom no longer threatens the established order, and neoliberalism makes effective use of Rousseau’s technique. Cultural conservatives — as well as democrats — might be more bothered if profit-making schooling began to secure a broader hold, as it has in vocational postsecondary education in the United States. A fully commercial educational market would have the potential to disrupt the reproduction of the traditions on which the conservative order depends. But profit making remains marginal to school systems. The contradiction between conservatism and neoliberal markets, which lies at the root of neoliberalism, has yet to fully emerge in education.<sup>4</sup>

In their respective critiques of the New Right, Apple and Gale and Densmore together indicate the ambiguity of the democratic project. It has accumulated over generations and has become central to mainstream understandings of education without becoming a conservative tradition. But democratic education has now lost the main reform momentum to the New Right. Neoliberalism’s primary claim is not that it is emancipatory, despite rhetorical flourishes about vouchers “freeing up” poor communities and African American families, but that it is modern, realistic, and inevitable. The authors are not quite sure whether to position themselves as interior defenders of a hegemonic public education system against the New Right (in the form of cultural conservatives pushing against the hegemony from below), or as critical outsiders who themselves are determined to undermine the official New Right hegemony in education (a hegemony comprised at least partly by neoliberalism in government). This points to the political flexibility of the New Right, alternating between market liberals and conservatives. But Apple is right to emphasize that it is an unstable flexibility. More fundamentally, solutions to these strategic dilemmas lie in forming the potential for a type of democratic agency capable of dealing with political issues on their merits. Democratic education is above all about transformations of agency. The way forward lies less with structural prescriptions like those of Gale and Densmore, which take agency as either given or as a blank sheet for engaged teachers and engaged scholars to write on, and more with “cultural struggles” that foreground self-transformation (ERW, 195). The New Right has made tremendous headway in the cultural sphere. So can the democrats. Gale and Densmore expect transformations in outlook to arise as a consequence of engagement and its corollary of political action. But not

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3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. by Bloom (1762; repr., New York: Basic Books 1979), 120.

4. This idea will be familiar to readers of Friedrich Hayek’s work, which will be addressed subsequently. For further discussion, see Simon Marginson, *Markets in Education* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1997); and the argument mounted by John Gray in the postscript to *Hayek on Liberty*, 3d ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 146–161.

all political struggles have the same implications for agency. And changes to agency are sometimes themselves the preconditions of political struggles rather than the result of those struggles. Changing agency is the central theme of Carlson's book.

#### VOYAGING

In *Leaving Safe Harbors*, Denis Carlson follows a more explicitly philosophical course.<sup>5</sup> In some respects, this is the most novel of the five books under review, the most compelling in its capacity to cultivate the imagination, and also the only one that takes us far into the content of the curriculum. The metaphor "leaving safe harbors" suggests a departure from the comfortable but misleading culturally conservative notion that our identities are fixed in stone. For Carlson, leaving this safe harbor — which is always so threatening a prospect for some and so exciting for others, and which is the source of much of the anxiety about educational progressivism, political correctness, and democratic reform in education — is always a bracing adventure: "The recognition that identity is an illusion ushers in a new stage of self-consciousness. It does not mean our struggles over identity end" (*LSH*, 86). Voyaging is a metaphor for changing notions of education and subject, a metaphor for the individual life, and the promise of a way out.

Carlson explores the possibilities for the transformation of educated identity suggested by successive philosophical myths. He starts with Plato's metaphor of the cave and then moves to G.W.F. Hegel's struggle between master and slave. He considers Friedrich Nietzsche's successive transformations: the camel, the receptacle of received cultural wisdom; the lion, deconstructing the dominant culture and revealing it as oppressive; and the child who is engaged in a process of creative self-production. The final stage of the journey is Martin Heidegger on technology and ecology. Carlson supports Richard Rorty's argument from Nietzsche, in conflict with Harold Bloom, that the purpose of higher education is not to introduce young people to the "great truths" of Western civilization but "to help students realize that they can reshape themselves" (*LSH*, 3). Carlson would extend this to secondary education as well: "Progressive forms of education are not primarily about the transmission of a codified body of knowledge to young people, even a 'politically correct' body of knowledge or truth" (*LSH*, 3). Progressivism, Carlson notes, has no fixed meaning and is contested; he advocates a radicalized progressivism marked by "democratic cultural politics" practiced by several overlapping social movements, "none of which is determinant or primary" (*LSH*, 21 and 24). Class should no longer be treated as the unifying metanarrative but as one part of the mix (*LSH*, 198).

Carlson gives less attention to neoliberalism than did Apple and Gale and Densmore, but he is a plausible critic of cultural conservatism, arguing that "Cultural conservatives are mounting a last ditch stand to preserve Eurocentric mythology in America at a time when America is becoming more diverse and

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5. Denis Carlson, *Leaving Safe Harbors: Toward a New Progressivism in American Education and Public Life* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2002). This work will be cited as *LSH* in the text for all subsequent references.

multicultural'" (*LSH*, 23). At the same time, Carlson draws on different parts of the classical canon. Perhaps the most powerful myth about teaching, he suggests, remains that of Prometheus:

According to Aeschylus, Prometheus is accused of three major crimes. The first is his boast that "I have delivered humans from being obsessed by death." That is, he has freed people from the fear of their own death, the fear of a final judgment after death, and the hope for a better life after death. No longer obsessed with the hereafter, they can begin to focus their energies on the concrete, material world in which they live. Prometheus' second crime is "instilling hopes into people's minds." Here the hope is not for a better life after death, but for a better world. The mythology of hope is, from the beginning, associated with belief that people need not accept the world the way it is but can reconstruct it according to a vision of a socially just world. They need not become resigned and fatalistic. Finally, Prometheus is accused of giving people a love for their fellow human beings — philanthropy. Instead of loving the gods exclusively, people begin to love each other and thus exalt humanity over the gods....Prometheus affirms what we might call humane, democratic virtues, virtues associated with human dignity and agency (*LSH*, 50).

This is the closest that Carlson comes to spelling out what a democratic educational practice might mean for him. But *Leaving Safe Harbors* does tell us at several points that he is an egalitarian. He is skeptical of the binary include/exclude role of formal education, and particularly of standardized testing (*LSH*, 46 and 55). He equates democratic sharing with kindness to strangers. He understands democracy in terms of learning, self-knowledge, and learned reflexivities, along the lines of Socrates and Nietzsche. He sees education as a process of personal empowerment, and the student as the potter rather than the pot (thus we have advanced since *Émile*). There is nothing conclusive about the philosophical examples Carlson uses. In many nations the potential pedagogical implications of his argument would be limited by vocationalism. He takes us forward in other ways, however: by focusing attention on philosophy as a source for investigations of educational identity and by drawing attention to the potential power of democratic myth making. *Leaving Safe Harbors* also makes a crucial strategic move. Rather than focusing mainly on a critique of the political forces that appear to be suppressing the potential for democratic education — an approach that begs the questions of what democratic education is and what it might be, what kind of agency it might foster, and why it is worth supporting — he looks for ways to open up education, and the democratic project itself, to new ideas. Others are free to join the inventive enterprise that Carlson has set in motion.

#### DELIBERATING

In *Democracy, Education and Citizenship*, Klas Roth addresses principles of democratic education more explicitly and brings the voyaging individuals into conjunction with one another in a socially and culturally embedded deliberative democracy.<sup>6</sup> Roth provides another kind of strategic response to the contradictory New Right imperatives of high individualism and conservative monoculturalism. Understanding schooling not as an individual investment in opportunity and risk,

6. Klas Roth, *Democracy, Education and Citizenship: Towards a Theory on the Education of Deliberative Democratic Citizens* (Stockholm, Sweden: HLS Förlag, 2001). This work will be cited as *DEC* in the text for all subsequent references.

or a medium of social control, but as the site for the preparation of citizens, he explores norms and conditions for the formation of democratic agency: "Children and young people can train their capacity as deliberating democratic citizens in education. They can be free and able to become masters of their educational situations through communicative action in the segmented life-world thematised as education" (*DEC*, 120). Education can be framed to enable students to open themselves to communicative challenge and reflexive agency, to imagine the historical and cultural situatedness of their own opinions, to understand the consequences of those opinions for others, and "to think anew, to think differently" (*DEC*, 123).<sup>7</sup> Along the way, Roth provides commentary on a broad range of authors who have worked a similar terrain. The material on Amy Guttmann is particularly helpful.

Like Carlson, Roth highlights a core problem for mainstream educational democracy: meritocratic approaches serve the question of fairness in educational selection, but they implicitly suggest that only a few citizens should receive advanced education. He is centrally interested in inclusive participation and social solidarity, premised on egalitarianism and mutual respect. Here he notes a second tension: in the past, egalitarianism has often been served by techniques of standardization designed to secure equal opportunity. Perhaps Roth's main contribution is his discussion of problems of difference in deliberative democracy, which creates space for a richer set of possibilities for agency: "The idea of a homogenous culture of homogenous citizens is...illusory," but it still has surprising salience among democrats as well as conservatives (*DEC*, 103). Following Jürgen Habermas, he argues that the validity of norms of public interaction should be determined not monologically but by all those affected, in uncoerced acts of cooperation orientated toward fostering understanding (*DEC*, 133). Roth's conception of deliberative democracy does not presuppose a particular analysis of policy or markets. He is critical of emancipatory critical pedagogies that draw on the eleventh thesis of Karl Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* (*DEC*, 124): "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways: the point, however, is to change it."<sup>8</sup> Roth argues that critical pedagogy frames the educational conversation in a monological fashion, asserting categorically that "No interpretative suggestion of what the good life is or could be, or how we should or can understand the world, society and ourselves, is or can be final or certain" (*DEC*, 122–123).

Nevertheless, as Roth notes, his own argument presupposes a common political culture. It is grounded in the idea of "cosmopolitan citizenship," whereby all share a common set of rights so as to sustain opportunities and freedoms to deliberate, noting that individuals' choices are made in varying social and cultural

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7. This follows the analysis of Nicholas C. Burbules and Rupert Berk in "Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences, and Limits," in *Critical Theories in Education: Changing Terrains of Knowledge and Politics*, eds. Tom Popkewitz and Lynn Fendler (New York: Routledge, 1999), 45–66.

8. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" (1845), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 15.

contexts. Like Amartya Sen, Roth observes that plurality is interior as well as exterior to individual identity.<sup>9</sup> We each bring a complex compound of commitments, affiliations, and roles to the common table:

Cultivation of a cosmopolitan citizen requires a critical multicultural education that acknowledges democratic deliberation about various issues, problematic situations and questions on the ethical, social, political, moral and pragmatic dimensions of citizenship. It seems possible to actualize such a democratic ideal by recognizing different dimensions of citizenship and different orientations of the mind in democratic deliberation. Such an account can recognize, as John Dewey argued, the importance of freer interaction between different social groups with different experience and a recognition of their mutual interests, and "a continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse." (*DEC*, 128–129)<sup>10</sup>

This might seem to emphasize common, inclusive structures of schooling and to warn against school systems segmented on the basis of culture or stratified according to socioeconomic markets. Roth is more tolerant of independent schools than some, arguing that the more central question is the extent to which schools are democratic and actualize democratic deliberation (*DEC*, 112). The difficulty with this argument is that whereas the question of democratic deliberation is normatively prior to school structures, unless the actual school systems are organized on the basis of creating the optimum conditions for democratic deliberation (which they certainly are not), social and cultural segmentation is ontologically prior to democratic norms and limits their potential. All over the world, independent schools, which often effectively isolate socially powerful families, compromise the inclusive communicative environment that Roth wants. This points to the need to consider how Roth's deliberative democracy could be implemented in practice — another kind of book, perhaps, but one essential to realizing the goals set forth in *Democracy, Education and Citizenship*.

#### PARTICIPATING

Fields and Feinberg provide a more empirically derived study of the vicissitudes of local democracy, focused not on crafting normative principles but on what happens when democratic educational principles are explored in practice.<sup>11</sup> *Education and Democratic Theory* does not have quite the sweep that the title suggests, but it is finely crafted and beautifully written and works well within its own terms. Its virtue and larger importance lie in the manner in which problems of democratic form, strategy, and agency emerge as contingent and historically situated. Of all the books under review, this one gets closest to the domain of practice.

Democratic participation is readily trapped in a means/end dilemma of the process of participation, which can absorb so much energy that it becomes an end in itself. Fields and Feinberg rightly note that the role of participation in

9. Amartya Sen, "Global Justice: Beyond International Equity," in *Global Public Goods: International Cooperation in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Inge Kaul, Isabelle Grunberg, and Marc A. Stern (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 116–125.

10. Here Roth refers to John Dewey's *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 86–87.

11. A. Belden Fields and Walter Feinberg, *Education and Democratic Theory: Finding a Place for Community Participation in Public School Reform* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001). This work will be cited as *EDT* in the text for all subsequent references.

establishing a deliberative democracy is secondary: the primary purpose of strategies to enhance community involvement in decisions is the effect such participation ultimately has on school students themselves, especially the enhancement of opportunity and achievement among disadvantaged social groups (*EDT*, 49). It is easy to lose sight of this, so that the horizon of thinking becomes the racial composition of the school board, the conduct of meetings, or the trajectory of individual community leaders within decision-making structures. Fields and Feinberg explore these dilemmas through an anonymous but detailed case study in one group of schools. While twenty-two percent of all students in these schools are African American, only seven percent of the students in programs for the gifted are African American. The Project for Educational Democracy (PED) “views itself as fighting for the public school ideal. The ideal represents for them participation, inclusiveness, and equal opportunity” (*EDT*, 13). It became clear to the authors in the course of the investigation that devolving more decision-making authority to the school level and encouraging more democratic participation in those decisions do not necessarily increase minority power on school boards, or in the PED itself. Typically the structures and cultures of participation are loaded in favor of dominant groups. Devolution does not necessarily enhance equality unless the positive relation between the two is continually worked on. *Education and Democratic Theory* touches on several dilemmas of participation that will be widely understood. First, there is the problem Rousseau expressed in *The Social Contract* — representative structures do not necessarily embody the general democratic will (*EDT*, 71–72).<sup>12</sup> Second, and more specifically, such structures often work against the strategies of particular groups that want to use techniques of positive discrimination to overcome a pattern of inherited subordination. For example, school board structures designed to attract the “best” individuals (meaning the socially influential and economically powerful individuals), in contrast to structures that better represent subgroups and that foster participative political experience among those who need it most, often tend to exclude African Americans. Structures that school board members should place the interests of children as a whole over the interests of particular groups of children seem worthy, but in practice they exclude the potential for minority advance. Third, it is difficult enough to use participation to advance on one front; it is even more difficult to address a plurality of needs. The PED saw organization by African Americans but there was no comparable work by other groups, including non-African American families from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Fields and Feinberg discuss different permutations of school-based decision making. It becomes apparent that not only is there a vast range of potential structures, but also that school-based decision making is not a universal and unambiguous public good any more than are educational administration, policy, or markets. It is a case-by-case matter.

In terms of its primary purpose of improving student achievement, it is difficult to assess the PED’s specific impact. In terms of its secondary purpose of

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12. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (1763; repr., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).

providing citizens with a space for deliberative democracy, Fields and Feinberg note that, though its members had different experiences and levels of knowledge and this necessitated continual negotiation and repetition, one of the program's strengths was that it offered a great scope for developing social dialogue and bonded relationships. This subsequently enhanced the capacity for critical self-reflection in the schools and among teachers. Fields and Feinberg cite the third of Marx's *Theses of Feuerbach*, "the educator himself needs educating."<sup>13</sup> When this process of education takes place in a setting such as the PED, Roth would probably approve. Fields and Feinberg are guardedly optimistic that the PED's efforts will encourage the emergence of more diverse and inclusive decision-making bodies in the individual schools, though this depends on continued pressure from outside the structures of formal decision making, and it would be facilitated by more enabling conditions for participation, such as remuneration for school board members. The ultimate determinants of participation are in the larger social environment. Representatives of African American and other often-excluded groups cannot be expected to set the group interest below the general interest until "society at large has gone much further in eliminating racial and class impediments to the fullest possible development of all our citizens" (*EDT*, 136). At the same time, delegate-style rigidity can be avoided through an ongoing process of dialogue in which variations in specific values and objectives are legitimated within a common democratic space.

#### CONCLUSIONS

For the democratic tradition to return to a vanguard position in education is not a simple matter. The preconditions for such a strategic move likely include a thorough exploration of the problems of democratization in education and an inventory of possible new forms. None of these books are definitive on either point, nor do they embody a major breakthrough in democratic educational thinking, but all of them help us to explore the issues and all are worth reading.

Many themes discussed by these authors merit further comment. However, since much of the contemporary focus of discussion in democratic educational circles is on commodification and New Right economism, as exemplified here by Apple's and Gale and Densmore's books, my concluding remarks focus on this issue. Elsewhere, I have contributed to that discussion, and I do not question the salience either of the New Right alliance between conservatives and market liberals or of the technologies of neoliberalism in government.<sup>14</sup> We have seen a good deal of those technologies in Australia, particularly in higher education. These forces have set the policy and political agenda for more than two decades and have often placed the momentum for democratic formation on the defensive, fundamentally retarding its potential and fragmenting our historical connections to the accumulated lessons of past democratic practices, from Dewey to Freire. Nevertheless, we need to move beyond the now familiar critiques of New Right and neoliberal phenomena to tackle

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13. Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," 13.

14. See Marginson, *Markets in Education*; and Simon Marginson, "Competition and Markets in Higher Education: A 'Glonacal' Analysis," *Journal of Education Policy Futures* 2, no. 2 (2004): 175-244.

directly the conditions whereby these power/knowledge systems reproduce themselves. This means focusing not just on contestations over public education and democracy within education, but on the larger environment of democratic practices. A disappointing aspect of all of these books is that they give little attention to such formative trends as the emptying out of the democratic content of mainstream politics; post-welfare state forms of government, and the roles of education and expertise within government; the potential for local activism in a more ubiquitously governed and networked social environment; the evolution of media and communications and the kinds of public spaces they constitute; and changes in youth cultures.

There is also little exploration of the implications of globalization. These books might have been written in 1975 for all their acknowledgment of how instantaneous communications and more frequent cross-border movement of people and cultural transmission have affected the practices of democracy and blown open the potential for agency. Roth's argument allows him to factor in a more intensive encounter with global plurality, and Apple comes closest to specifically discussing the strategic impact of globalization (see, for example, *ERW*, 31). But judging by most of what is written here, one would conclude that the problems of democratization were the same everywhere or, alternatively, so unique to each location that there were no real connections among them. Neoliberalism does not make the mistake of neglecting global determinations.

Neoliberalism in education and elsewhere has always been intent on weakening democratic cultures, except to the extent that these cultures support the market order. F.A. Hayek did not see citizen participation as a desirable end in itself. He polemicized repeatedly against what he called "unlimited democracy" and especially against egalitarianism, stating that liberal economic freedom (free markets) was a higher value than political democracy.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, in *Politics, Markets and America's Schools*, John Chubb and Terry Moe set educational democracy against student achievement and argue explicitly for the transfer of decisions about education from democratic assemblies to "automatic" market mechanisms.<sup>16</sup> Despite the holes in their argument, it has influenced policy thinking about schooling almost everywhere. Yet neoliberalism is by no means invincible. It is not grounded in deeply felt popular needs. It is a governmental ideology that occasionally mobilizes popular forces ("taxpayers"), rather than a genuine movement from below (such as religious populism). Its power lies not in economic seduction or political utopianism but in the hyperrealism of Margaret Thatcher's "there is no alternative," that grim and gritty neocon promise of certainty-in-an-uncertain-world (a world made more uncertain), which received another lease of life after 9/11. When there *is* an alternative, the political landscape will look very different.

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15. Friedrich A. Hayek, "Social Justice, Socialism and Democracy," in *Three Australian Lectures* (Sydney: Centre for Independent Studies, 1979).

16. John Chubb and Terry Moe, *Politics, Markets and America's Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 1990).

The question, then, is how to open up the potential for new political alternatives to emerge in education. I think that the key here is to reforge the potential for solidaristic, movement-style relations. Educational competition, in which neoliberal market ideologies meet older educational practices, is the primary factor fragmenting the potential for democratic solidarity and obviating any challenge to the neoliberal order. According to F.A. Hayek, the doyen of the New Right, “competition is *the* principle of social organisation.”<sup>17</sup> More revealing of the neoliberal agenda in education is his statement that “competition is as much a method for breeding certain types of mind as anything else.”<sup>18</sup> When competition is foregrounded, social justice policies cease to regulate opportunity and government partly withdraws from social policy, as Apple notes (*ERW*, 87). This truncates the potential of professional educators as democratizing agents, the notion at the core of both mainstream and radical democratization strategies. Competition between individuals fragments the potential for democratic school communities: parents and students seek fulfillment not through forging common institutions but through “kicking ass.” Competition among schools stymies the potential for system-wide policies designed to equalize opportunities. A world order shaped by competition asserts the fundamentalist interests of one nation against another and valorizes every reduction of the conditions of life in the name of “global competitiveness.” Competition in education shapes human nature to fit itself. We will need to jettison universal competition — and the barren assumption that the war of all against all is the driver of human progress — if we want to advance democracy.

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17. Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), 37 (emphasis added).

18. Friedrich A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 3 of *The Political Order of a Free People* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 76.